



JUNE 2024

WHEELS ACROSS THE PRAIRIE HERITAGE CENTER

P.O. Box 1091 • 3297 Hwy. 14 • Tracy, MN 56175 • (507) 626-1949

www.wheelsacrosstheprairie.org • info@wheelsacrosstheprairie.org



40th Wheels summer underway

The Wheels Across the Prairie Heritage Center continues to reach new milestones.

This summer, the Wheels is entering its 40th season. Yes, that is correct. Wheels Across the Prairie has been carrying out its mission of preserving, interpreting and sharing the Tracy Area's rich historical heritage for 40 years.

No doubt, the founders who gathered on June 6, 1985, to celebrate the museum's grand opening, would be astonished at what the Wheels Across the Prairie would evolve into over the next 40 years. From a single exhibit building, the Wheels Across the Prairie has grown into a village with 16 buildings and an imposing four-unit freight train.

A host of projects are coming to fruition for the Wheels in 2024.

Two new buildings have opened this summer. A vintage barbershop, featuring the chair used for thousands of haircuts by long-time Tracy barber Jack Miller, will be celebrated at a special July 11 open house and dedication. The museum's new military

building, has also open, with new displays highlighting the contributions of local military veterans.

Also targeted for this summer, is the installation of flag poles and light poles along streets in the Wheels village, the extension of municipal water services to the Wheels grounds, bringing electrical services to small buildings on the east side of the Wheels campus, and the installation of a new septic-tank sewage system.

Major maintenance projects for Wheels Across the Prairie this year includes restorative work on its 1860s log cabin, repairs to the museum's windmill, and the installation of new siding on the railroad section foreman's house.

Amidst all this activity, several special events are planned, including an August 12 book talk by author Cindy Wilson, and an August 25 classic car show.

When Tracy Box Car Days weekend rolls around for Labor Day, it will be time for the Wheels annual vintage tractor show and pork burger benefit.

Project wraps up

Wheels Across the Prairie volunteers Ken Witt, Garry Hippe, and Ron Boje were all smiles recently, and why not? The workers had completed interior finishing work on the Wheels new military building and had just begun clean-up. New displays have now been arranged in the new building, which is now open to the public. To see what the inside of the building looks like now, turn to page 2.



New military building opens

Wheels Across the Prairie's new military building has had its first salute! The 24x36-foot building opened in early June, after volunteers completed interior painting and trim in late May.

The new space will allow the Wheels to do a better job of showcasing the legacies of local military veterans. Past military-related exhibits were crowded into a corner of the Main Barn, with many items left in storage, because of a lack of exhibit space.

The new military building is insulated with heating and air conditioning systems, making it suitable for indoor gatherings and programs. The temperature and humidity controls will also provide a museum-quality environment for the preservation of artifacts. The veterans' building is just the second-building on the Wheels campus with heating and air conditioning capabilities.

More than \$90,000 was raised to build the structure. The Wheels museum board thanks all donors for their generosity,



This is how the interior of the Wheels' new military building looks today. New showcases and displays, in a sparkling new space, allow the Wheels Across the Prairie to attractively exhibit memorabilia from local military veterans.

In addition to telling the story of local military veterans, exhibits are also planned to provide general historical context about American military conflicts. It is hoped that some interactive exhibits will be in the mix.

Special touches inside the military building will include a "Tomb of the Unknown" image and the inscription "What Is a Veteran?"

A "grand opening" for the veterans' building will be postponed until 2025, when all planned flagpole, street light, underground utility and landscaping

improvements are complete across the Wheels campus.

BT Construction of Tracy was the general contractor for putting up the building, with G&R Electric doing the electrical work. Volunteer interior finishing was coordinated by Garry Hippe, Ken Witt, and Ron Boje.

A steely-eyed sentinel at the front door, leaves no doubt as to the facility's military perspective. A second military figure is being sought to flank the doorway's opposite side.



THANK YOU TO OUR MILITARY BUILDING DONORS

Alan & Judy Johnston
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Nyla & Ragnar Nordvik
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David B Abernethy and David
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memory of W. David
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Garry Hippe
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Carol and Joe Cooreman
Joyce Greeley in memory of
Leroy Greeley
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Tom & Sue Morin
Pam Nowaak



Tracy Bottling Company was a leading Tracy industry for decades, until closing its doors in 1986. Tracy Bottling's signature soda, 7-Up, is touted in this marketing sign.

It's yesteryear once more

Has it been awhile
since you've visited
Wheels Across the
Prairie?
You might be surprised
by
how much new
there is to see.



The era when Scrappy the Bulldog kept the beat for Tracy High School marching band is recalled by this base drum.



Colorful jewelry, once worn and owned by Cora Starken, originally came from Berg Jewelry in downtown Tracy.



A set of china, donated by Doris Drackley, was once used by her parents, Oscar and Kathryn Stenberg.



Tiny leather shoes, once offered for sale at the Cain Department Store, were a popular baby gift in the 1950s.



A washboard and an Easter Bunny riding in a car—all made from wood—pre-date contemporary plastic merchandise. The objects date from the mid-20th Century at the Cain's Variety Store of downtown Tracy.



Scrappier, Spartan or Panther? A display of high school memorabilia shows evolving local school mascots.



When large items at the Wheels Across the Prairie needed to be moved, John Meyer would often be the one to climb into a tractor's seat and get the job done. In the fall of 2019, Meyer maneuvered a restored Allis Chalmers harvester (on display courtesy of Roger Khiin) through the overhead door of the Helmberger-Johnston building. Jeff Meyer (foreground) signaled that there was plenty of clearance.

Wheels bids farewell to John D. Meyer

Wheels Across the Prairie lost a good friend with the passing of John D. Meyer this winter.

The long-time Wheels board member and Tracy area farmer died Jan. 27 at age 78.

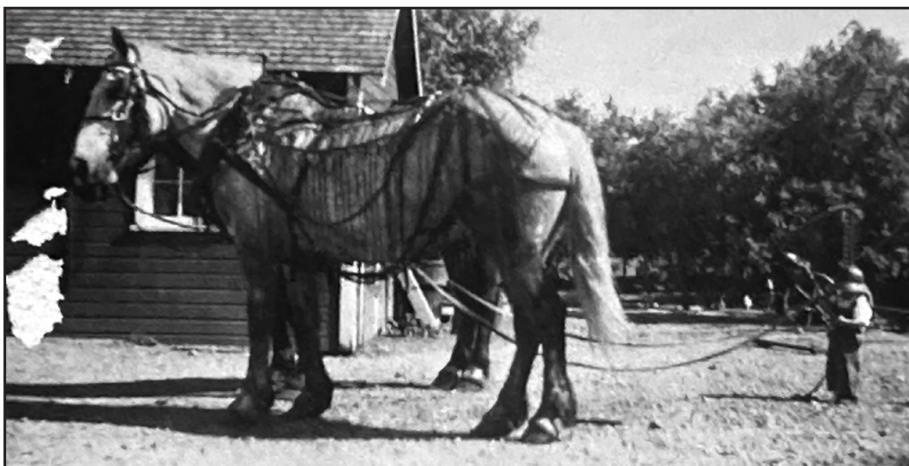
"John was someone you could always count on," reflects Wheels President Jon Wendorff.

The 1963 Tracy High School graduate was known for helping organize the Wheels' Box Car Days tractor show and drives with his son, Jeff. When questions arose on the Wheels grounds about vintage ag equipment, the elder Meyer usually had the answer.

Especially fond of the color green in tractors, Meyer was a familiar sight in driving John Deere tractors for Tracy Box Car Days and other area parades. The son of Wayne and Lorraine (Furan) Meyer, John Meyer farmed on land that had been homestead by his great-grandparents. He served on the Wheels board for about 15 years.



John D. Meyer loved being behind the wheel of a John Deere tractor.



Horsepower on the farm was in its waning days, when a young John Meyer was playfully posed with his family's team of draft horses.



Hundreds of intriguing artifacts are on display at the Wheels Across the Prairie Heritage Center. Among the most colorful, is this Victorian kerosene lamp, that was later converted into an electric lamp. The kerosene lamp was considered a wonderful innovation in the late 1800s, because it burned brighter and cleaner than the animal and whale oil lamps that they replaced. Painted parlor lamps, like the one displayed at the Wheels, are often called "Gone With the Wind" lamps today, because they were used on the set of the popular 1939 movie starring Clark Gable and Vivian Leigh, which depicted a glamorous plantation mansion in the antebellum South. However, such lamps didn't really become popular until about a quarter century after the Civil War.

In the bottom photo, petunias bloom in an old hand-wringer washing tub recall what laundry day was like for great-grandma.



Windmill renovations completed

A farm windmill has overlooked the Wheels Across the Prairie site since the 1980s.

Moved from the Archie Blanchette farmstead south of Amiret, the vintage windmill was one of the first additions to the Wheels grounds after the Main Barn opened in 1985. But in recent years, the aging landmark has fallen into disrepair. Several of its metal blades had broke off.

A crew from Great Plains Windmill Service, Fairfield, Iowa, refurbished the windmill in early June.

The \$6,500 project rebuilt the windmill's head and platform, and put on new blades. A new regulator will be installed to shutdown the turning rotor during periods of extreme winds. Donations from several private sources covered the cost.



Windmill renovations were completed in June.

2024 WHEELS MUSEUM MEMBERSHIPS

2024 Individual Memberships

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Ronald Bendixon
Warren Emmons
Joyce Greeley
Loren Rykhus
Cal & Deb Ludeman
Lois Henkel
Alan & Cleone Richardson
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Laura DuCharme
Norine & Kami Hanson
Doug Edwards
Jack Miller
Dave & Linda Rykhus
Alan Judy Johnston

BUSINESS MEMBERS

SW Sanitation
LaVoy Repair
Tracy Chamber of Commerce
The Caboose

Museum friends adopt buildings

Would you like to help out at Wheels Across the Prairie, but don't want a huge time commitment?

Consider "adopting a building," on your own or with a group of friends.

The "adopt-a-building" program was launched at the Wheels last year with great success, with volunteers stepping up to take care of eight buildings. Adopters include: Marge and Gene Short, Amiret Post Office; Cindy Rignell, summer kitchen; Dennis & Anita Fultz, depot; Betsy Schmidt, Muriel Coulter, country school; Sue Keul, Moline General Store; Shari Blegen, barbershop; Colleen

Schiller, Mary Sanow help where ever needed, Sis Beierman The Cottage; Cookie Knott, Vi's Norwegian Hut; Linda Wendorff the Log Cabin

Adoption opportunities are still available for the St. Mark's Church, Monroe Town Hall, Pamp Barn, Helmberger-Johnston building, blacksmith shop, Main Barn, and the recently opened military building.

Volunteers are asked to give their building a thorough cleaning each spring, and then visit about once a month during the summer to keep things tidy. Help is appreciated also in the fall when displays are closed for winter.



Sis Beierman, left, and Ron Boje, right, are among the volunteers who keep the Wheels Across the Prairie grounds looking neat.



Country school offers lessons in renovations

Repurposed school to offer prairie experience

When Nancy Gertner says she has roots to the Shady Nook country school south of Westbrook, she’s not exaggerating. Four generations of her family have links to the school.

Her great-grandparents—German-speaking Ukrainian emigrants Wilhelm and Elisabeth Gärtner—homesteaded land near the future District 48 school and sent children to it.

Nancy’s grandfather, Karl Herman, born in 1882, was a student at the school, married the sister of the school teacher, and served on the school board. Her grandfather and his wife, Sophia, who may have taught at Shady Nook,

sent three sons to the school, including Nancy’s father, Leo. Leo and his brothers went to the school through the eighth grade in the 1920s and ’30. After establishing a farm and marrying Flossie Mitchell, Leo helped raise three daughters who also went to the school. Leo spent some of those years on the school board.

When Shady Nook in 1966 became the last country school in Cottonwood County to close, that wasn’t the end of the family’s school connection. Nancy’s mother bought the school property at a 1966 auction. The family painted the old school red a few years later, and it became a storage shed.

Following Flossie’s death, Nancy became the schoolhouse’s owner. For the past 14 years, Nancy, with help from her husband, Paul Maggitti, friends and family members, has embarked on an ambitious dream to preserve and revitalize the old school building as a comfortable camper cabin, rented to visitors looking to experience wide-open prairie spaces. “I think that people who want to be like Laura will enjoy my schoolhouse,” she told attendees at the Wheels Across the Prairie annual meeting on May 5.

As keynote speaker for the Wheels annual meeting, Gertner described herself as a “traditionalist” when it comes to historic preservation. But she has learned to balance the quaintness of original with modern practicality. When the schoolhouse renovations



Mrs. Kleve lines up with her students for a flag-raising ceremony at the Shady Nook country school in spring of 1966. From left are: Mrs. Kleve, Leo Olsen, Ed Olsem, Roger Van Madam, Nancy Gertner, Bradley Gertner, George Olsen, Bruce Gertner, Collette Gertner, Lindy Lou Jensen, Tom Olsen, and Gary Kuehl. The picture was taken by Bob Schroeder, who wrote a feature story on the country school’s closure for the Fairmont Sentinel.



Shady Nook Country School, as it was before its closure in the spring of 1966. Students raised hands to answer question from Mrs. Kleve, their teacher. (Photo courtesy Fairmont Sentinel).

began in 2012 with a new roof, steel replaced the original wooden shakes. Although she liked the look of the wood roof, she realized steel’s longevity made it a better choice. In a nod to the past, the new steel roof was designed to look like shingles.

She didn’t try to recreate the schoolhouse’s classroom, opting instead for amenities to make it guest comfortable. Plaster and lathe walls were replaced by sheetrock and insulation. High ceilings were utilized for a stairway and loft with six-bunks, and a reading nook. A new electric-service panel paved the way for new wiring, lights, and air-conditioning ducts. A Murphy bed adds sleeping space. A kitchenette with modern appliances and cabinetry was installed with contemporary meal-preparations in mind.

Ma Ingall’s wouldn’t have dreamed of such conveniences. Yet to be completed items include an electric toilet (no trip to the outhouse for visitors), the reinstallation of hardwood flooring, and the interior painting and wood trim.

And yet, the school house retains much of its yesteryear chapter.

Vintage wainscoting graces some interior walls. Many of the schoolhouse’s original windows have been repaired, reglazed, and re-used.

Nancy, who took a class in window repairs before starting her renovations, feels that original windows, properly maintained and repaired, will last longer than new vinyl-clad windows, because most original windows were made from old-growth pine. Ditto, for the schoolhouse’s wood siding.

“The wood on the old siding holds paint better than the lumber that you can buy now,” she said. For that reason, Gertner chose to scrape and repaint the schoolhouse’s old wood siding, rather than put on new vinyl or steel siding. She feels that the original siding, if properly maintained, will outlast the “permanent” siding materials that are popular today.

When does the owner hope to complete her project, and begin accepting reservations?

“I don’t really have a deadline,” she laughs. “Hopefully, before I die.”

Following her presentation, Gertner

was asked what she thought about her country-school education, which ended after the fifth grade.

“There were pluses and minuses,” she said. Mixing children of all ages allowed younger kids to learn some of what was being taught to the older students. Older kids benefitted by helping with the little ones. Gertner has pleasant memories of kids tossing balls over the schoolhouse during recess.

However, small enrollments could also be limiting. Gertner had no other girls her age to play with at country school, so that when she did start going to in-town school, “I didn’t know how to jump rope like the other girls.” She felt that the “simplistic” science curriculum in country school resulted in her needing to catch up with her new classmates.

The 1973 Westbrook graduate earned a degree at Mankato State, before embarking on a career in the U.S. Navy, where she retired with a rank of Lt. Commander. Her husband, Paul Maggitti, retired from the U.S. Army, with a rank of major.

The St. Louis Park couple plans to relocate to Windom, which will bring them closer to family and their country school project.



Sisters, Marcia and Joan were on hand to help Nancy paint the school house, in the early stages of renovations



As a former country school student herself, Nancy Gertner was interested in the artifacts displayed inside the Wheels Across the Prairie restored country school.



Classic wheels covered the Wheels Across the Prairie grounds last August for a classic car show. This year's event is scheduled for Sunday, August 25.

Classic car show returning

Gentlemen (and ladies), start your engines!

Make plans to motor over to Wheels Across the Prairie's second annual classic car and cycle show. Sunday, August 25.

The show will be a reprise of the Wheels first car show, held on the same August weekend last summer. Seventy-eight entries were driven in for the first show. Exhibitors and spectators said that

they liked the historic setting of the Wheels campus. Mother Nature provided picture-perfect weather for the inaugural show.

For more information call 507-626-1949.

Author to discuss Westward expansion

The fledgling prairie town of Tracy was catapulted to prominence 14 decades ago by two Chicago & Northwestern Railroad actions.

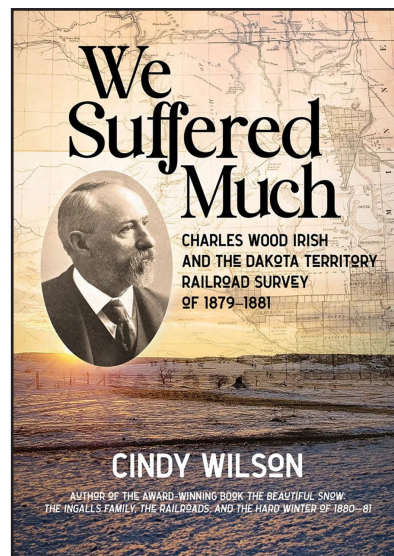
The first, was the C&NW's 1879 westward expansion of a new line into Dakota Territory.

The second, was the 1881 decision to make Tracy a division point.

But what did the railroad expansion mean for the new settlers who would stream into Dakota in the 1880s?

A new book by Cindy Wilson, "We Suffered Much," tells the story. Wilson will be at the Wheels Across the Prairie to talk about the book for an August 12 program that begins at 6:30 p.m.

Wilson was last at the Wheels in 2020 to discuss her book, "Beautiful Snow," which described the extraordinarily harsh winter of 1880-81, which cut off railroad supplies to DeSmet and other Dakota villages for months.





The vintage railroad Section Foreman's House, moved to the Wheels several years ago, will be getting new siding later this summer or fall. A Fairmont maintenance car in the foreground, looks ready to take a maintenance crew out on the rails.



Evie Ourada, a Tracy Area High School sophomore, is among the friendly faces that visitors will see at the Wheels Across the Prairie this summer. Trenton Johnson, another TAHS sophomore, is also working at the museum this summer.

Become a member! Or renew for 2024.

Your financial support helps the Wheels Across the Prairie continue our mission of preserving and sharing Tracy's heritage!

RETURN TO:
WHEELS ACROSS THE PRAIRIE HERITAGE CENTER
PO BOX 1091 - TRACY MN 56175

Name _____

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LEVELS OF MEMBERSHIP
(Dues annually on Jan. 1)

_____ Individual - \$30

_____ Business \$100

_____ Family - \$50

_____ Other \$ _____



Paul Maggitti, a model railroading buff from St. Louis Park, set up a model railroad layout for Wheels Across the Prairie's Annual meeting May 5. The model railroad, which has several Chicago & Northwestern features, can be seen in the Wheels Main Barn.

Light-pole sponsors can honor loved ones

Sponsorships are still available for several decorative light poles being erected at Wheels Across the Prairie this summer.

Plans call for nine, 10-12-foot light poles to be put into place along the two "streets" in the Wheels "village." The vintage poles will provide needed illumination after dusk, and also add to the security of the grounds.

Sponsorship costs are \$4,500 for each pole. A plaque will identify the person or family being honored, as well as the donor, if desired. The poles are designed to hold hanging flower pots in the summer, or holiday decorations during the Christmas season.

Light pole sponsorships are available on a first-come, first-served basis. For more information, contact Wheels President Jon Wendorff at email jawendo62@gmail.com, phone 507-626-1949 or project coordination Garry Hippe at email ghippeshake@gmail.com, phone 626-0180.



Utility upgrades will enhance museum

Thanks to funding commitments from Lyon County and the City of Tracy, municipal water hook-ups are coming to the Wheels Across the Prairie.

Since its opening in 1985, the museum has relied on trucked in water supplies held in a tank.

The new water services will be extended to Wheels Across the Prairie's Main Barn from a water main near the corner of South St. and Hwy. 14. The water service will be used for the Main Barn's bathroom and utility room. Stubs for two outdoor spigots will also be installed, making it easier to water gardens and shrubs around the museum grounds.

The water service extension was originally scheduled for last fall, but state approval of the plans was not received prior to the winter-freeze-up.

The \$20,000 that has been authorized for the municipal water extension is from American Rescue Plan Act relief funds granted to Lyon County.

Other utility improvements planned in 2024 for the Wheels Across the Prairie campus include: electrical conduit to all buildings; natural gas lines to the military building, and the Helmlinger-Johnston building; and the installation of a new 2,500 gallon sewage treatment septic system.

Also under consideration, is a small addition onto the west side of the Main Barn to make room for an additional bathroom to better accommodate visitors at large events. (The Wheels now has only one uni-sex bathroom in the Main Barn).

The disturbances caused by the construction will mean that the tracks for the Wheels' miniature passenger train will not set up this summer. It is hoped that the train will resume operations in the summer of 2025, with the tracks relocated a bit further west on the Wheels campus.

Museum is open Fridays to Sundays

The Wheels Across the Prairie Heritage Center will be open Fridays through Sundays this summer through Labor Day, from noon to 4 p.m.

Expanded hours will likely be added during July weekends during the Walnut Grove Pageant weekends. Admission is \$8 for adults and \$4 for children 5-12. There is no charge for kids under 5.



Jack Miller in front of the new Barbershop

Miller barbershop dedication set

A dedication is planned for the new Jack Miller Barbershop at the Wheels Across the Prairie, Thursday, July 11, at 5:30 p.m.

Hot dogs, chips, and beverage will be served. Everyone is welcome.

The vintage barbershop honors Jack Miller, a farm boy who came to downtown Tracy in 1962 to take over a barbershop, and then kept cutting hair for 50 years before retiring in 2012. At the center of the recreated barbershop is Miller's last

barber chair, along with many other personal hair-cutting mementoes.

Although the barbershop is named after Miller, the barbershop is also a tribute to the dozens of other barbers that have worked in Tracy through the decades. Items used by other barbers are also included in the Wheels barbershop.

Tracy carpenter Joe Beierman volunteered his labor to create the barbershop's interior.

Foundation keeps supporting Wheels

Thanks to nearly \$20,000 in grant funding from Community Foundation of Northern Colorado, major work will be done this year on Wheels Across the Prairie's log cabin and section foreman house.

A \$9,800 grant from the foundation will fund restorative work on the historic log cabin that once stood near Bear Lake and the Great Oasis in Lowville Township, Murray County. The two-story cabin, which dates from the late 1860s, needs new chinking between its logs and roof reinforcements. Northern Bedrock, a Duluth-based company that specializes in log cabin restorations, has been booked to do the work. The roofing renovations, the first phase of a 2-year project, are scheduled for September.

Another \$9,800 grant will be used to buy materials needed to complete renovations on the section foreman's house.

The late 19th-century railroad dwelling was moved to the Wheels grounds from DeGraf in 2020.

The Northern Colorado Foundation was established by the late Evelyn Helmberger and her husband, the late John Holmboe. Helmberger was a 1949 Tracy High School graduate who taught at several colleges and earned a doctorate degree in education from the University of Minnesota. Holmboe was a civil engineer who helped develop apartment buildings, shopping malls and community centers from Minnesota to California. Helmberger died in 2008 at age 76 in Fort Collins, CO. Holmboe was a St. Paul native who died in 2009 at age 82.

Over the past decade, the foundation has been a major benefactor for Wheels Across the Prairie, contributing over \$250,000 for museum improvements.



Evelyn Helmberger-Holmboe, and her husband John, established a foundation that has been a major benefactor of Wheels Across the Prairie.

Stars & Stripes array will fly this summer

An array of star-spangled panache will be unfurled at Wheels Across the Prairie this summer.

Forty-five, 20-foot steel flagpoles have been ordered for the museum grounds, and are expected to be installed by late July or early August. American flags will be flown from each of the poles, which will line two concrete pathways that run through the Wheels Across the Prairie's "village."

The Stars & Stripes will fly along both sides of the walkway that

runs east to west from the summer kitchen to the Wheels parking lot. Old Glory will also fly along the Wheels' most southerly pathway that extends from the Moline General Store, past St. Mark's Church to the Veterans' Memorial.

Solar-powered lights will illuminate 3x5-foot flags after dark. With each pole anchored 2.5 feet into the ground, the top of each flag pole will be about 17.5 feet high.

Each of the flags will be flown as memorials to Tracy area military

veterans, with \$1,500 donations for each flag given by family and friends. Plaques naming each honored veteran will be placed at the base of each flag pole.

A portion of the money raised for the flag pole project will be set aside for future maintenance expenses.

Museum board member Garry Hippe has spearheaded the flag project. He can be reached at ghippeshake@gmail.com, phone 507-626-0180.





**Wheels Across the Prairie
Heritage Center**
PO Box 1091 • 3297 Hwy 14
Tracy, Minnesota 56175
www.wheelsacrosstheprairie.org

Expensive train restoration looms in six-year plan

The Wheels Across the Prairie Heritage Center has a six-year plan and timetable for future improvements.

One of the largest future needs is the restoration of the Wheel's four-unit freight train, its signature attraction.

The museum's 1915 switch engine and coal tender car was moved onto the Wheels grounds in November of 1990. A wooden boxcar and a caboose followed. Each was refurbished soon after their arrival.

But now, 30-years later, each part of the train is showing signs of deterioration. Rust is creeping onto the engine and tender car. Rivets are missing. Windows are out in the engine's cab. The boxcar's sliding doors are broken, and its red paint chipped and fading.

"The board knows that a major restoration is needed," explains President Jon Wendorff.

The train restoration, which would include sandblasting and painting the engine, is slated for 2028 in the long-range plan, but Wendorff feels "we need to start the process now."

One of the first steps will be "reaching

out to railroad restoration companies" to get a better idea of restoration needs and potential costs.

The long-range plan estimates the cost of restoring all four-units at \$300,000.

"That is a huge price tag. It is going to

take a lot of grant funding and donations to get this done."

In 1990, museum backers raised over \$30,000 to move the switch engine and car from Rochester to Tracy.



Three decades have come and gone since the Wheels Across the Prairie brought in the switch engine, coal car, boxcar and caboose. Each of the units now needs restorative work.